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Yung Ladies

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Abstract:

Yung Ladies began as an investigation into female representation and has expanded into a brand and even lifestyle. Founded as a space for female solidarity, Yung Ladies works to break down notions of what a young woman should be and simultaneously spreads our ideals and attitudes through our clothing line and social media presence. This paper spans the ideological movements, various forms of artistic media, and artist precedents that have inspired this project.Yung Ladies includes investigations into new media identities and notions fad ideological movements, consumerism and conspicuous consumption, and brand identity as a means of personal representation. These ideas may seem disparate but they come together to form the complex conceptual core of this project. Yung Ladies is not straight forward, it is challenging and constantly asks questions of both its founders and of those who engage with it.

BFA Thesis Statement:

There is no artistic medium surrounded in more conflict and debate than the photograph. We often view the camera as an unmediated observer, recording reality as it exists. However, a picture is a single perspective filtered through the photographer's own biases and preconceived notions. The photograph builds collective memory, enforces ideologies, and even creates and reinforces identities. Through history we have been conditioned to understand ourselves and others through representational images. Today with the ubiquity of the photograph, we are able to construct personhood and to observe other's realities literally from the palm of our hand. In order to explore the complicated nature of representation as it pertains to the construction of self, this thesis discusses the project Yung Ladies which promotes female empowerment and explores the emergence of the internet as a space to curate ones identity. The work also examines notions of personhood in the context of brands and how consumer goods have shaped our ideas of self. Social media and advertising are perfect platforms to investigate the authenticity of the photograph and how the image has evolved from a means of documentation to the primary way in which we construct identity.

Images at their most basic form are a means of communication, essential in the construction of history and the human experience. Where speech is not sufficient, or even at a time when speech did not exist, the basic human impulse was and still is to depict through images. From cuneiform in 31st century C.E Mesopotamia, to Egyptian hieroglyphs dating back to 3500 BCE, even before language, symbols and pictographs were used to quite literally construct and convey meaning. The Lascaux Caves,

estimated to be about 17,300 years old, reflect the human desire to record and document our surroundings and lives. Early handprints in caves in Indonesia, Spain, and Australia, are examples of the human impulse, albeit abstractly, to depict the self. The history of human sculpture is rich with these notions of identity and the construction of personhood. The timeline of Greek sculpture reflects shifting views of perfection and the ways in which humanity is understood through representations.

As evident from art and other artifacts, through history we have been conditioned to understand ourselves and others through representational images. Humanity is deeply grounded in images, both artistic and vernacular, as validation, as personhood and identify, and as communication. Pictorial representations construct both collective and personal identities. Even before the advent of the camera, history is told through the context images in mediums like painting and sculpture. In the 21st century, social media is the exaggeration of these base instincts to represent the self. Our new media representations allow us to curate and construct, presenting specific versions of ourselves.

Photography implies that we know about the world if we accept it as the camera records it, however photographic representation is the opposite of actual understanding. Susan Sontag asserts, photographs are an "amorous relation, which is based on how something looks, understanding is based on how it functions," yet we continue to use images as our main source of knowledge and understanding (23). Photography is the ability to construct the world, to capture moments and realities. Sontag asserts that "to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed" (4). Photographs in essence "scale" or "package" the world, therefore creating stereotypes and archetypes of cultures, genders, and identities. It is often taken for granted that the ability to capture and analyze

images is not a basic human right. The consumption of images is directly related to notions of a capitalist society and hierarchies of power and culture.

During the Industrial Revolution with increased demand for portraiture from the middle class who could not afford traditional oil paintings, photography became known as a "democratic medium." Even at this early stage, the desire to picture ones self as a means of elevating status, is inextricably linked to the rise of photography. With the box camera, then the invention of the more portable 35 mm film, and finally the digital camera in 1984, photography has become increasingly accessible. Today, anyone with a cell phone has the ability to record not only their own lives, but also the entitlement that anything can be documented.

Yung Ladies began as an exercise in the creation and curration of identities through the digital camera and the internet, and grew into a critical look into 21st century female representation and new forms of solidarity and empowerment. Women are often represented within a canon of familiar stereotypes. The girl, the mother, the whore, and the pushy business woman, are all tropes of women that have been constructed through time by culture and media. Men are never taught that they have to be just one of these things, and are rarely labeled the way women are. Young women, who occupy the un-indefinable and therefore threatening space between girl and mother, are often underestimated and made inferior. Whereas young men are seen as full of potential and future success, we are labeled as naïve, emotional, and irrational. Through the over exaggeration of feminine tropes and the celebration of girl culture, like the broken heart and the use of pink, "Young Ladies" seeks to subvert ways in which women are represented and promote messages of female agency.

The name “Yung Ladies” was created as an antithesis to the associations with the correctly spelled “Young” Ladies. The dictionary definition of a “young lady” is, “A form of address used by an adult to a girl, often in anger” or “a girlfriend; a sweetheart.” It recalls being reprimanded and implies a certain lack of agency and power as a young woman. In contrast “Yung Ladies” are defined as “women who know what's up.” This definition is designed to remain open to the viewer’s interpretations and question notions of “coolness” or what it means to be “cool.” The branding of Yung Ladies continues to subvert theses notions through the exaggeration of girlish or feminine tropes as a means of reclaiming culturally constructed symbols in the name of empowerment.

The color pink, for example, is often overlooked because of its association with femininity, as something “cute” and lacking any depth or meaning. Young female consumers and girls are taught to consume pink or girlish objects throughout their lives and when we become adults we are told to reject these aesthetics in order to be taken seriously. In using pink we are both criticizing the consumer structures that have made pink into a color that is distinctly weak and inferior and then associated it with young girls, and also reclaiming pink as a color representative of empowerment and female solidarity.

In the 1700s pink was a color for both men and women, worn by men in particular as a symbol of power and masculinity. Michelle Finamore, curator of “Think Pink” an exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, discusses a 18th c. portrait in the show depicting of two children. She says, “one is in a pink brocade satin dress, one is a yellow dress, and they have these pinafores over them, and you cant tell if they’re boys or girls.” In *Journey Around My Room* published in 1794 written by French writer Xavier de

Maistre, he even recommends pink and white bedrooms for men to foster a good mood, health, and youthfulness. Valerie Steele, renown author and director of the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, in an essay on the color pink wrote, "In the 18th c., it was perfectly masculine for a man to wear a pink silk suit with floral embroidery, pink was initially considered slightly masculine as a diminutive of red which was thought to be a warlike color." Even as late as 1918 in a trade catalog for children's clothing blue was recommended for girls saying that is a "much more delicate and dainty tone." Pink on the other hand was seen as a "stronger and more passionate color, and because it's actually derived from red."

Pink became a strictly feminine color post World War II when men came home and women were pushed out of the work force. Hand and hand with the rise of pink is the rise of the female consumer. Rosie the Riveter became June Cleaver and from makeup and fashion to kitchen appliances, pink arose as a way to sell these distinctly female products. Today, pink still remains the color of the female consumer and is used to market a wide array of traditionally "female" products. It is the color associated with Barbie and Disney princesses, even breast cancer awareness campaigns are centered around the pink ribbon and slogans like "Think Pink."

In her on going work "The Pink and Blue Project," photographer Jeong Mee Yoon photographs young boys and girls with all their blue and pink objects respectively (Figure 1). The children are often positioned in the back of the frame completely lost in the sea of toys, games, and other products. The images are a testament to the ways in which gender coding through marketing shapes us even at a young age. Not only are the colors distinct, but the items themselves speak to the molds of femininity and masculinity

that young girls and boys are pushed into. While the young girls are surrounded by tutus, dolls, and easy bake ovens, the boys are in a sea of swords and superhero figures. Mass marketing has become a universal language that has permeated our culture to an extent that we don't even notice it any more.

Figure 1: JeongMee Yoon, Pink and Blue Project (2005-ongoing)

Beyond pink our culture also regulates gendered symbols and ways of dressing as a means of keeping the sexes visually separate. Girls are praised for being more masculine as a marker of being "different than other girls," someone who will go on to be successful in traditionally male dominated fields. The "Power Suit" for example is a symbol of the business woman who is successful in business yet is stripped of her right to traditional notions of femininity and motherhood. Girls are taught that they must choose between power and the domestic sphere where in which she must "act like a lady" in order to find love and marriage. On the other hand, men are often reprimanded and shunned for adopting more feminine styles and taught at an early age to stay away from things like hearts. Notions of "sissy boys" are the same as "tomboys," and serve as

societies means of policing gender. We are often asked why we choose to include men as models in Yung Ladies imagery, however we believe that it is important to show men in traditionally feminine symbols like the broken heart. There is no reason a man should not wear pink or hearts, by limiting what we can and cannot wear we further differentiate gender.

Beyond colors and symbols, prominent feminist theorist Judith Butler breaks down gendered behaviors and questions whether they are natural or learned as a sort of performance imposed by the normative patriarchy. She writes, “gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender creates the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all” (Excitable Speech, 273). Rather than being a fixed biological attribute, gender should be seen as a fluid variable which shifts and changes in different contexts. Gender construction is a product of expectations placed on women to act and represent themselves in a certain way. "We act and walk and speak and talk in ways that consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman" (132).

In her seminal writing “Women, Art: A Manifesto,” Valie Export expands on these ideas, writing that “man has defined the image of woman.” Her manifesto begins simply:

THE PLACE OF ART IN THE WOMEN’S MOVEMENT IS THE PLACE OF WOMEN IN THE ART MOVEMENT

THE HISTORY OF WOMAN IS THE HISTORY OF MAN

Men have created social constructions perpetuated by the media, art, and greater society, that “women must participate in the construction of reality through the elements of the media” in order to achieve “equal social rights, self-determination, [and] a new self-awareness...” In order to achieve equality women must create “new artistic messages and

forms of expression." She preaches that women must use art as a means of influencing the cultural consciousness. Her photographic work "Identity Transfer" is an example of this call to action. By crafting a simultaneously male and female persona, the images call conventional gender roles and representations into question (Figure 2 and 3).

Figure 2 and 3: Valie Export, Identity Transfer (1968)

There is a rich history of art and theory exploring notions of gender and what it means to be a woman in a male dominated world. In the 21st century female artists continue to break down the boundaries of female identities though use of the internet and other popular media. Contemporary artist Ann Hirsch both writes extensively about and makes work examining how technology and social media have affected gender roles. In her piece "Women, Sexuality, and the Internet" she writes about how women have a "history of problematic visual representation," that has been further complicated by the

internet. “The internet is a place where for the first time (more or less) individuals are able to create imagery in their own image and disseminate these images widely.” She asserts that while the internet has exacerbated the limits placed on women by misogynistic and societal norms, it has also provided us with a platform with which to fight back.

Yung Ladies is not the first project that uses the internet and social media platforms to explore solidarity and female and empowerment. The work is heavily influenced by internet artists like Grace Miceli, Avida Bystrom, and Molly Soda, who use the web to subvert traditional notions of gender and female representation. Molly Soda, arguably one the first “cyber feminists” has been using Tumblr for years to exploit notions of the ways in which women should act and represent themselves. Her Instagram handle is “blondeandbloatedforever,” and she recently leaked her own mirror nudes and late night sexts completely refusing to acknowledge the male gaze. She is actively reclaiming the web as a safe space for women writing, “I have a lot of girls messaging me about how my stomach hair makes them feel better/less self-conscious about theirs. That’s what I care about – not about whether or not men find it attractive” (Figure 4). Grace Miceli, also known as Art Baby, has crafted a net persona around pop culture and nostalgia. In 2011 she founded the Art Baby Gallery, an internet platform for young female artists that has since taken form IRL (in real life) in a show entitled *Girls at night on the Internet* which featured artists like Arvida Bystrom. Bystrom’s work addresses themes of sexuality and identity working on photo serious dedicated to body hair and even period blood.

Figure 4: Molly Soda, “Should I send this?” (2015)

In the 21st century, the most popular means of representing the self is on various social media platforms. Yung Ladies is an experience that simultaneously critiques and exalts social media presences and asks how identity can be created and commodified on the internet, investigating the line between reality and performance of these social media personas. From choosing photos based on how we look, to an actual list of things that we plan to Instagram, the persona is carefully constructed. The internet has provided a space in which we choose how we are viewed, constantly challenging ideas of authenticity and reality.

Out of all the social media platforms Instagram appealed to us the most fundamentally since it is founded on the idea that you can curate the way people view you through a collection of images and short captions. It is the platform that has perhaps challenges fine art photography the most, by positing that anybody can be a photographer

and giving them an immediate outlet to share their work and literally receive “likes” and comments. Although the Yung Ladies social media persona is constructed, the Instagram is simultaneously a reflection on real life scenarios specific to young women. These images are of moments that many young women deal with but are often reticent to publicize in their social media accounts because of societal standards. This dichotomy between these very real images and the inherently false nature of social media is characteristic of the internet and web personas in general.

As a means of visually representing social media as a constantly currated or posed space, when composing Yung Ladies photographs we asked our models to exaggerate poses of things they would naturally do, like checking their watch, eating or drinking, or even selfieing (Figure 5). Yung Ladies imagery also reflects the questions we are exploring about consumerism, representation, femininity, and brands. Traditional advertising or look book images never include other brands or signage, however we intentionally include them in Yung Ladies imagery. In doing this, we are playing off the other logos and locations as a means of situating Yung Ladies in the brand identities and lifestyles that other companies have constructed.

Our models pose with objects and places that are associated with both high and low culture and economic class, yet are all part of the consumer landscape, as a means of talking about and even subverting notions of conspicuous consumption and the ways in which we situate ourselves near luxury items as a means of elevating our status. Conspicuous consumption is a term introduced by the economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen in his book "The Theory of the Leisure Class" published in 1899. The term refers to the way in which consumers buy expensive items as a display of wealth

rather than to fulfill real needs. The result, according to Veblen, is a society characterized by money and vapid displays of status.

Figure 5: Leah Nordman, “Simon” (2016)

By literally creating and selling a clothing line Yung Ladies investigates brands and identity in consumer society. Sontag asserts that “A capitalist society requires a culture based on images” (Sontag, 249). Brands and advertising especially in American culture are a means of representing oneself and reflect our fixation with the way we are viewed. In Victor Lebow’s essay “The Real Meaning of Consumer Demand,” he discusses how we have made consumption our way of life, seeking ego satisfaction in consumerism. “The measure of social status, of social acceptance, of prestige, is now to be found in our consumptive patterns. The very meaning and significance of our lives

today expressed in consumptive terms." In "The Triumph of Advertising in American Culture," James B. Twitchell outlines how our love of objects and things is a result of the industrial revolution and the ways in which advertising has added value to objects. "Advertising is not part of the dominant culture. It is the dominant culture, it had become the dominant meaning-making system of modern life" (5).

By creating and selling these branded items the clothing line has become our means of distributing the lifestyle. We are able to constantly engage with our audience every time someone wears an item or buys something. This project is speaking to notions of brands and brand identity. How we dress and adorn ourselves is our main means of communicating instantly to others our social status, class, and personality. In essence we wear certain clothes and certain brands as a means of representing ourselves and constructing our identity. When wear specific brands we are choosing to represent the lifestyle that they market.

In the end this project has asked us a lot of questions about the new wave of click bait feminism that we are in essence using to sell our products. I don't think that because feminism is now popular or has been branded in a particular way that it makes it any less valid, I think the conversation should be broad and not narrow. However Yung Ladies struggles constantly with these ideas and what exactly "popular feminism" is. It is also loving satire of brands and clothing lines and the ways in which we thoughtlessly spend money on material goods as a means of validating ourselves. We love this culture, we are a part of this culture, but we are simultaneously critical and uncomfortable with it. Yung Ladies is not a novel enterprise, but if you look past the pink, the hearts, and the script writing which are already being used heavily on the internet to talk about solidarity

and girl power, Yung Ladies is truly a full investigation and experience into becoming an empowered young woman. We started and continue to run a business that is blatantly seeking success and money in a traditionally masculine way and will continue spread our ideas with each purchase and every sticker.

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Figures:

Figure 1: JeongMee Yoon, Pink and Blue Project (2005-ongoing)

Figure 2 and 3: Valie Export, “Identity Transfer” (1968)

Figure 4: Molly Soda, “Should I send this?” (2015)

Figure 5: Leah Nordman, “Simon” (2016)